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ABSTRACT

Literature is authentic language, written with unusual care, skill, and language awareness. It is useful for teaching culture and civilization, but equally useful for teaching basic elements of language: grammar, vocabulary, rhythms, and registers. Literary skills are also widely used in everyday situations, with sophisticated literary techniques used in such a pervasive medium as advertising. Exercises in grouping words or grammatical categories in literary works, as in a poem, are easily undertaken in the language class and can uncover hidden layers of meaning. Other techniques include removing words or the title or jumbling the order of a poem's lines and asking students to supply the missing parts. Stylistic variation can be examined by using different means of comparing the same thing or person, as in a newspaper article versus a poem. Teachers must consider what kinds of texts to use, the best type of exercise for the medium, the kinds of introductory or comparative materials to use, specific advantages of the genres, and the placement of literature in the language syllabus. Variation in quality and register is desirable in choosing literary texts for the classroom. (MSE)

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THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

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THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE

The purposes of this introductory paper are threefold:

1. To point out some advantages of literature as a subject of study in a foreign language;

2. To suggest some ways in which the teaching of literature might be approached in a creative way, in order to derive the maximum language-learning benefits from it;

3. To raise some general questions for discussion.

Needless to say, very little of this presentation will be original. The more worthwhile ideas come from conversations with Mr Seán Devitt, of the Department of Teacher Education in Trinity College, and from reading Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature, by H.G. Widdowson [Longman, 1975]. Some of the applications, and some of the more dubious notions, are my own.

To argue the central position of creative literature within language would be to risk preaching to the converted, and also to risk repeating an earlier article ["The value of literary translation in language teaching", in Language Across Cultures, edited by Liam MacMathúna and David Singleton, Dublin, IRAAL, 1984, pp. 221-234]. Instead, I will merely draw attention to some special properties of creative writing which give it a particular claim to attention in the language class.

Literature is authentic language, written with unusual care, skill and language awareness. As it aims at creative expression, it must have a strong claim to inclusion in any communicative approach to language. But in order to serve a useful purpose in language learning, the text must be to a certain extent "de-consecrated", placed within a context of general language use, and presented in a way which allows the student to respond actively and autonomously to its creative character. Such "desecration" may be anathema to the more traditional type of literary appreciation.

It goes without saying that literature is useful for teaching culture and civilisation. We need to be equally

clear, however, as to its usefulness for teaching basic elements of language. Grammar, for example: could literary texts help to convey the "feel" of the subjunctive in Italian? Or lexis: it could be argued that literary works present vocabulary in a way which combines the denotation of words with strong emotional connotations. What better than literature to convey the natural rhythms and sounds of a sentence? And if one aims to provide the student with a sense of linguistic registers and an awareness of different levels of appropriacy, what better than comparative examples of dialogue from a novel to convey just that grasp of nuance?

An essential fact of life is that language is really used for dramatic or expressive interpersonal purposes, just as much as for pure description. The creative use of language is not a marginal luxury, but a central aspect of true communicative competence. Moreover, many supposedly non-literary uses of language, which would be recognised as both authentic and everyday, are in fact extremely stylised. For example, the lonelyhearts column and the horoscope feature, both of which are generally recognised as being peculiarly stimulating to the language learner: "NYC GWM, 30, Ivy journalist, Slavic handsomeness, seeks strapping, All-American guy who looks even cuter in glasses, likes Maugham, fried chicken, subtitles and supratitles. Photo please. NYR, Box 00000." "ACQUARIO (21 genn.-18 feb.) Giorno: la mattina dovrebbe trascorrere senza intoppi e contrarietà. Seguite attentamente l'evolversi degli avvenimenti perché nel pomeriggio dovrete intervenire con urgenza. Sera: un incontro sentimentale interessante." Such sybilline utterances demand an almost literary response.

There is even a close analogy between interpreting literature and interpreting conversation, as the listener is compelled to extract a factual and personal meaning from often seemingly incoherent fragments. "Literary" skills, then, are widely used in everyday language situations.

Sophisticated literary techniques are also used in such a pervasive medium as radio advertising. Among current Irish radio advertisements, one may perhaps disregard the crude transposition from adverb to adjective in "Think first, think First National", or crass phonetic/graphic reinforcement in "Of course there's a Corsa for you!". More subtle, however, is the separation of spelling from sound in the refrain "New Nissan Sentra: You Need This Car", where the phonetic similarity of the product and the suggested need are partially concealed from the conscious mind. Still more subtle is the deliberate use of the propensity to spell out and "read" what we hear, in another motor advertisement which sings: "Have a Mitsubishi day! Drive your cares and blues away...." Here, the link between an Eden-like existence and the

purchase of a Japanese motor-car is insinuated with serpentine subtlety by the inadmissible graphic mirage of being able to drive one's cares as one drives one's car. The strength of the subconscious suggestion is reinforced by the fact that it cannot be considered by the logical and critical faculties, being too absurd for words.

At this point, I want to jump straight from jingles to poetry, from Mitsubishi to Seamus Heaney. The first poem in the collection called Death of a Naturalist [London, Faber, 1966] begins: "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests; snug as a gun." The poem, "Digging", presents the poet at his window, seeing his father digging a flowerbed, thinking back on previous generations who worked the land, and deciding in the end to "dig" with his pen rather than following those ancestors with a spade. In bald summary, the "message" of this complex and beautiful poem could be summed up in the maxim: "The pen is lighter than the spade". But right from the outset, a second, more traditional and more dangerous association is proposed by the poem's first simile. The snugness of the pen conjures up a more deadly implement: graphically though not logically, "snug" is "guns" backwards. And the pen is traditionally mightier not than the spade but than the sword.

Once this deadly image has been smuggled in, the ambiguity of ancestral links is explored in ways which can actually be grasped by means of one of the simplest and most banal of language exercises: grouping words under predetermined headings. What phrases in "Digging" are about killing? The list would include: gun, drills, rooted out, buried, nicking, slicing, cuts of an edge through living roots...and, of course, the title-word. Guns have led to much digging of graves.

Other simple exercises in word-grouping, easily undertaken in the language class, could uncover further layers of meaning. Parts of the body, for instance: it will be found that the writer himself owns the head, finger and thumb, while his rude forefathers are assigned the straining rump, the coarse boot, the inside knee and shoulder. This division of parts reinforces the evolutionary thrust of the poem, which is also supported by the historic transition from bog to potato field to garden, discovered by listing kinds of land worked in the poem. Listing sounds, one finds the poet, coming of age, hearing "a clean, rasping sound" from his father in the flowerbeds, but remembering "the squelch and slap/Of soggy peat." Many of these elements reinforce the central ambiguity of generation: generations succeed each other in a cycle of generation and death, and we are both joined to and cut off from our ancestral roots. The sexual aspect of this fatal cycle is suggested in the phrase "buried the bright edge deep", while the contradictory tensions of ancestral relationship converge on the phrase "the curt

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cuts of an edge/through living roots".

These levels of interpretation, including the poem's essential ambiguity, are accessible through simple language activities which could be undertaken in the classroom. Another simple exercise, the recognition and grouping of grammatical categories, might further reinforce our understanding of the poem. For example, a list of the adverbs, in order of appearance, reads: down, low, firmly, deep, sloppily, down, down. And verbs ending in -ing: digging, straining, stooping, digging, loving, nicking, slicing, digging, living.

A more sophisticated level of grammatical analysis might note that the progressive form of the verb needs a separate accompanying indication of tense (was digging, is digging) to provide a time-frame, and that repeated -ing endings suggest a certain timelessness in the repeated activities of the generations. Exactly this kind of analysis, on a poem by Theodore Roethke, is offered by Widdowson [1975, cit.], pages 54-57, 108-115.

But Widdowson's book is particularly impressive in the way that it shows how simple classroom work, skilfully directed, can approach the subtlest meanings of poetry. For example, in exploring the links between seemingly unrelated words, he proposes [pages 104-107] a practical series of steps. "Question 1: Using a dictionary if necessary, note down as many details about the meaning of these words as possible..... Question 2: Which of these terms are linked by (a) having the same details? (b) having details which are related in meaning?" This type of semantic association is then used to evaluate links which might at first sight appear hopelessly enigmatic.

Rather than simply listing words in a certain category, it might sometimes be more creative, and more productive, to knock out those words (adjectives, adverbs, rhyme words, etc.), or to remove the title, or jumble the line order, and ask students to supply the missing elements. Widdowson suggests some of these strategies; others I have heard proposed by David Little and Seán Devitt. Rather timidly, I have gone so far as to conceal a title, but have not dared to try more drastic assaults on the text. To conclude the second portion of this paper, looking at techniques for using literature, I want now to touch briefly on the principle of comparison.

Widdowson [pages 88-103] offers a convincing exposé of how descriptions of literary characters may be analysed by contrast with very different types of description, even a passport application. Similar examples of stylistic variability have been presented in Authentik. The great value of the comparative principle is that it forces the student to consider actively what makes a particular text assume one form and not another.

Thus, a combination of literary and non-literary treatments of a topic can prove doubly illuminating. If the starting-point is a literary work on death, for example, one may set it in a context of other linguistic treatments of that theme. Carducci's stylised poem, "Pianto antico", on the death of his little son, might be placed beside the even more stylised convention of the death notices in an Italian newspaper, with their archaic rhetorical formulae --- "addolorati ne danno il triste annuncio", "affranti dal dolore ne danno l'annuncio", "è venuto a mancare all'affetto dei fratelli" --- if only to show that "unnatural" expressions are regularly used as a narcotic against inexpressible grief. Carducci's letter to a friend, telling him of the death and doubting whether he will ever get over it, might be used as a "way in" to the imagery of seasonal rebirth in the poem --- a fruit-tree reflowering after winter, contrasted with the image of the father as a withered, stricken plant. Or that image of trees and rebirth might be approached by another comparative exercise: setting Carducci's poem beside "The Rose Tree" by W.B. Yeats, where the withered tree stands in need of a blood transfusion from Pearse and Connolly. Irish readers will quickly grasp that Pearse & Connolly was not a firm of market gardeners, and that therefore the rose tree is of political rather than horticultural interest. From this realisation, it is a short step to understand that in Carducci's poem, the "real" as well as the "figurative" tree may also have symbolic meanings which transcend the literal meaning. And this realisation that in poetry all words, whether introduced under the guise of literal description or smuggled in as metaphors, have an equal imaginative footing, is a very valuable lesson for understanding not only literature but also many other persuasive uses of language.

Having touched, then, on the advantages of literature in language work, and on some techniques for activating student involvement with literature, I would like to conclude by raising some questions which language teachers might like to consider in detail:

1. WHAT SORT OF TEXTS SHOULD WE USE?	- short or long texts? - what subject-matter? - complete texts or extracts? - contemporary or older? - what registers? - what sources? - does "quality" matter?
2. WHAT IS THE BEST TYPE OF EXERCISE?	- (a) for poetry? - (b) for prose?

3. WHAT KINDS OF
   INTRODUCTORY AND
   COMPARATIVE MATERIALS
   SHOULD BE USED?

4. WHAT SPECIFIC ADVANTAGES - (a) from poetry?
   MIGHT ONE EXPECT? - (b) from prose?

5. SHOULD THERE BE A SEPARATE
   "LITERATURE" CLASS? OR
   SHOULD LITERATURE PERMEATE
   THE LANGUAGE CLASS?
   SHOULD THERE BE
   "SET TEXTS"?

A lively discussion took place on these points. On the first question, it was felt that limited language ability among pupils meants that short texts should be preferred. But another participant in the workshop felt that there are two distinct kinds of reading, intensive and extensive. While it makes sense to cover short texts intensively, word by word, students should also be encouraged to read fast through, say, a 120-page novel, one chapter per weekend. This longer work could then be studied in two different ways in class: short extracts could be "pulled apart", word by word, while longer passages could be read fast, for comprehension work. Comprehension exercises might be handled either in the mother tongue or in the target language.

It was suggested that short stylistic readings of a few pages in a novel could be done in class as preparation and motivation for the pupils to continue reading the book extensively, in their own time.

As for subject matter, one practical suggestion was that the topics set for the oral examination should be covered, particularly in works that include authentic dialogue. The students' own interests should also be catered for: not only sport and music, but also personal topics such as emotions and relationships. Subjects such as love need to be treated with some delicacy; and it was also suggested that beginners' classes might need texts to be slightly doctored from the linguistic point of view.

On the question of preparation, it was felt that the subject-matter of the literary work should be introduced first as a general, non-literary topic. In asking students to read ahead in their own time, it is most important to provide them with a list of questions to be answered, so that they read with a purpose and gain a sense of achievement from "sorting out" the text. Even peripheral or badly-chosen questions are infinitely better than leaving them to read without direction.

On the question of which comparative materials might be used, there was disagreement over the desirability of visual images. Producing photographs of things talked about in a poem may make the poem more accessible, but there is also the risk that the students' own perceptions of the images might be excessively predetermined by such aids. More generally, one speaker felt that although the younger generations are geared to visual images, language teachers ought to concentrate more on enhancing verbal awareness.

Particular attention was drawn to the usefulness of plays in stimulating oral work and dialogue. Plays can be used to develop such skills as reading, speaking and memory. They can explore topics which are of interest to students. Some plays may be available on cassette, for listening as well as reading. Video or comic-strip versions may aid comprehension.

On the question of "quality", it was felt that teachers might well decide to choose challenging creative works rather than sticking to bestsellers. "Quality" is not synonymous with elevated diction; one can read good literature without opting for Racine. However, some participants felt that with a language barrier to cross, students might be glad of a more popular, simplistic level of writing than what they are capable of absorbing in the mother tongue.

A mixture of quality, and a mixture of register, was felt to be desirable in choosing literary texts in the target language. In general, participants in the discussion group felt that literature has an important contribution to make to the foreign language classroom.